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Guatemala Volunteer

Week 5

Competency: Global Citizenship ~ Communication Level 3: Through practice with a second language, recognizes and participates in cultural differences in verbal and nonverbal communication and draws connections between multiple experiences and issues related to language and culture.

This week marks halfway through my abroad experience and this week a volunteer group from Texas visited the orphanage I am serving. They brought activities to do with the girls but very few of them knew any Spanish, so they also brought three translators to accompany them. Their presence gave me another perspective of how those who are not a part of the local culture and locals can interact with one another when addressing a language barrier. I was able to observe this from my unique perspective with insights to both sides of the coin. I have insight to how the Texan volunteers felt coming into a whole new environment and language because I have been here a short 5 weeks. I also have a perspective on how the local staff that run the orphanage feel because I have become part of their group and understand the daily routines and needs of the girls. What set me apart was my role is semi-temporary. I am more permanent than the new volunteers’ two-day stay, but in a month, I will be on a plane back to the US while the staff continue their daily work. This was a remarkably positive group, but I was most interested in their use of the translators and how they got by with not knowing the language.

The translators played a big part in how the volunteers were able to interact with the girls. When giving directions, most of the volunteers were able to communicate through hand signals or doing an example project. In the group setting, there was little need for the translators. The first instance where I noticed a translator used was when one of the volunteers told her story about her belief in God and how it has developed. Throughout the story the woman would tell 2-3 sentences in English, wait as the translator repeated them in Spanish, then continue on again with 3 more lines. The translating added many minutes to the storytelling as should be expected, but when the woman spoke in English she was still able to portray er emotion through her words that the translator did not always convey because they came from different backgrounds and experiences.

When the translators were utilized the most was when the girls and volunteers had time to mingle together. The girls were in small groups working on the small crafts brought in, some were waiting in line to get their picture taken with friends, and others were playing with the babies around the courtyard. The translators floated around and helped anyone that flagged them down to translate a word, phrase, or compliment. All three one the translators were kept relatively busy as they help the group, but at times the volunteers made due with hand signals and the few words they did know. It is likely that there were times when the message the girls interpreted was different than what the volunteers meant to convey, but the girls were still happy to have a new person to interact with.

The use of translators as a tool was valuable, but there were other times where the more authentic relationships came when the translators were not used and the volunteers simply did their best to communicate. If it were to be categorized, the translators would be best used in a structured and formal situation whereas the volunteers’ personal communications and interactions were of higher value than having their words translated. In the US I have rarely been at a translated event aside from ASL interpreters. I know they are utilized in our culture, for example in hospitals and some schools, but I have never been in a situation where one was used.

Looking ahead to my career as a teacher I see myself having at least a few students who may be the only English speaker in their household, or possibly students from an immigrant family where no one knows the language and this experience has given me a perspective on when a translator may be useful in my career. If possible, I would like to utilize this tool in the professional setting of parent-teacher conferences but try to communicate on my own if I meet them in public outside of school given they are Spanish-speaking. If Spanish is not their language, I still would like to greet them and begin to establish a friendly image with them despite the language barrier. Translators are a great tool and watching the group of Texas volunteers utilize this tool efficiently gave me a relatively unbiased experience that I can refer to in my future career.